



Creativity and teamwork in visual arts activities

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Abstract

This project attempts to contribute to the exploration of the following question: To what extent and under what conditions are the goals for teamwork and collectivity compatible with the effort for the development of creativity in the case of visual arts education?

When it comes to teaching art, every educational intervention is formed, organized and principally given meaning on the basis of the peculiar nature of the artistic act. This procedure reflects the art itself, the desire to create as well as the meeting with the visual production. Attempting to reach the core of this approach we have as base the theoretical framework of M. Merleau-Ponty, according to whom an artistic act is mainly an expressive activity.

But what are the limits of the artistic act in a place which functions in accordance with specific educational designs? To what extent is the intervention of the educator justified? Can the educator himself act artistically by participating actively along with his students in collective visual art acts? Does teamwork assist or, on the contrary, undermine personal creative efforts?

These questions were examined during a pilot project, which was the result of a triennial collaboration between the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of Patras University and the School of Visual Arts of the Municipality of Rion. Active artists with no particular proficiency in pedagogy or previous teaching experience were chosen as the School's collaborators. The purpose of this choice was that the artists would act exclusively on the basis of their artistic side, acting artistically in work teams which were constituted by the artists themselves, preschoolers and primary school children. The only didactic convention they had to observe was the attempt to convey to the children their way of thinking and working, in order to illustrate the set of actions contained in an artistic practice. The artists were also asked to record their commentaries and preserve the entire produced material, from the first drafts and sketches to the works considered complete.

The artists established an ambience of real visual and creative conditions, in which everything is under the service of the expressional attempt. In this frame various experiences are combined, the existing information is not limiting, known situations are being conceived in original ways; new prospects are being opened up. This pattern introduces us to the concept of creativity, in the way suggested by J.P. Guilford, according to whom creative thinking is the result of the combination of two separate intellectual functions: convergent and divergent thinking.

Joint creative activity was the cohesive element of every team and the final work came up as a collective result, to which every member had contributed in its own special way. When the children worked individually again, the experience they had acquired was reflected in the variety of their personal expressions and their inquiring attitude towards the expressive means. The quality of the shared experience -both by adult artists and by the children- in this collective frame, is not obviously measurable, nevertheless it's crystallized in the belief that the creative practice, even though it is a personal achievement, emerges, gets materialized, and is reinforced through organized common human interaction.

Key words: creativity, visual arts education

Introduction

The aim of this project is to highlight the meaning of the artistic act in an educational frame, whilst, at the same time, the following question is posed and is investigated: to what extent and under what conditions the goals for cooperation and collectivity are compatible with the effort of increasing creativity, when it comes to visual arts?

The personal involvement of children in the artistic process is thought to be one of the most indisputably self-evident facts in the area of visual arts education. In an equally self-evident and uncritical way, visual acts are thought to be almost "synonymous" with creativity. Nonetheless, the picture that is being



presented most of the time in the educational reality doesn't fully justify taking these issues for granted. Some clarifications related to the meaning of the artistic act at school are needed, as well as the terms and conditions under which the visual acts are actually "creative".

These questions were examined during a pilot project, which was the result of a triennial collaboration between the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of Patras University and the School of Visual Arts of the Municipality of Rion. The purpose of this project was to research the limits of educational intervention in the area of visual education, at the time when it is being designed, organized, formed, and, principally, given meaning, while constantly focusing on the artistic act itself. In this sense, the meaning of creativity, which many definitions and theories have tried to understand and explain, is presently being approached in relation to some features of the artistic act.

The artistic act as a creative act

The first question arising from the above, concerns the nature of the artistic act itself. Attempting to reach its core we make use of the approach of M. Merleau-Ponty, according to whom the artistic act is mainly an expressive activity that gives meaning to human experience, as it constitutes an attempt to give shape to what would otherwise be –most possibly– trapped inside each separate conscience (Merleau-Ponty, 1991, p. 43, 45). Thus the artistic act principally constitutes an attempt of externalization, an attempt of utterance of meanings in a visual way.

This essential and fundamental feature of the artistic act isn't necessarily ignored or hidden in the frame of an educational convention. The expressive attempt ought to be present even at this state, as, otherwise, a primary aspect that teaching ought to highlight, is being obscured: regardless of the frame, the visual act is an act of externalization and it obeys to an attempt to render something visible and presentable to others.

Obeying this expressive intention, the artistic act is not susceptible of any methodological limitations, it can surpass all restrictions and barriers, it can overcome all the limits of "ordinary" shapes and ideas, creating new unexpected connections and combinations (Wilson, 2003, p. 211, 213). Therefore, it escapes codification, it can't be determined accurately and it can't be standardized, because neither can the meeting with art -the aesthetic experience- be standardized.

From this viewpoint the attempt of creating visual forms requires the activation of a "free" mental process, in the frame of which various experiences and segments of knowledge are being combined without limitations, known situations are being conceived in totally new ways, new prospects are being opened up. Nonetheless, all these elements that constitute the "substratum" of the artistic procedure must be systematized, organized and clarified, in order to achieve a specific visual result each and every time.

This pattern introduces us to the concept of creativity in the way it is suggested by J.P. Guilford, according to whom creative thinking is the result of the combination of two separate intellectual functions: divergent and convergent thinking (Guilford, 1950, p. 445, Salla-Dokoumetzidi, 1996, p. 51). The first function (divergent thinking) "moves" in the area of the conception of new ideas, new situations, radically new and fantastic ways of thinking without any logical support being needed. On the contrary, convergent thinking attempts to give a certain structure to the products of imagination and to proceed to designs that aim to their realization. Creative thinking moves between those two "poles" and so does the artistic act.

Intervention based on the artistic act

The question arising at this point concerns the determination of the meaning of artistic act within the frame of an educationally designed place -i.e. a school of arts, a school- in which an educational project is being implemented. In this frame, the meaning of the artistic act at school, consists of making the child understand, through its personal experience, the reasons for which visual art forms are being created and the ways through which they are being created, thus aiding the child to gradually form a cohesive, overall and complete point of view in regards to art. This is the purpose of visual art education and this purpose doesn't confine itself, neither does it change according to the age group addressed.

A series of new questions arise here: within the frame of this educational convention, is the expressive attempt completely absent? To what extent can our educational intervention coordinate with the artistic



process? Up to what point is the intervention of the educator justified and to what extent can it be planned in advance? Is it possible for the educator himself to act artistically by participating actively alongside with his students in collective visual art acts? Does teamwork assist or, on the contrary, undermine personal expressive efforts?

These questions were examined in the frame of the educational project that we mentioned at the very beginning. Certain of its primary aspects will be presented now on.

Description of the project

During this project visual artists along with more than 100 children, (preschoolers and primary school children, 4-8 years old), formed small groups that worked together. The kids were involved in visual art acts for 2 hours per week on a permanent basis, for three years in a row. Active artists with no particular proficiency in pedagogic theories or previous teaching experience were chosen as the School's collaborators. The purpose of this choice was that the artists could act exclusively on the basis of their artistic composition, by acting artistically and creating work teams that consisted of the artists themselves and the children. The only didactic convention they had to observe was the attempt to convey to the children their way of thinking and working. This convention was considered sufficient, in order to illustrate the set of actions contained in the artistic practice, as well as what instigates it.

The participation of the children wasn't taken for granted at the beginning, but was a condition that had to be instigated and cultivated. In order to achieve this aim it was considered that the children should start from the same basis that adults artists do. The expressive attempt, with the exact meaning given to it by Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1991, p. 43, 45), as a visual utterance of meanings, was posed as a start point.

The project was divided in four stages:

A. At first children were encouraged to work individually, without any kind of intervention, in an exploratory introductory meeting. Their creations did not lack the expressional qualities expected from their age, nevertheless the presence of certain designing stereotypes as well as the awkwardness concerning the treatment of their concept and the use of the artistic means were profound. It was notable that their subjects were narrowed down to the classic stereotypes (princesses, castles, heroes of illustrated stories etc.), while it was also notable that they didn't edit the background and that, even though they were offered a wide variety of materials to work with, they almost exclusively used markers, the only material with which they were already familiar.

B. On the second stage a particular didactic convention was created. This convention was the one of a traditional School of Arts, and could be described as a medieval kind of convention, as the artists worked having the children as their assistants, in order to convey to the children their way of thinking and working artistically. The role of every artist was to reveal the processes in which he is involved, his expressive intentions, the ways to explore his thoughts and ideas, the criteria and the reasons why he chooses to use the various materials, and the relations of all the above with what will finally be produced as a final outcome.

In this frame a certain schematization of the artistic process was considered useful, according to certain stages, in the way that they are being suggested by several scholars of the teaching of art: the desire of artistic expression, the conception of an idea, the mental process of it and the artistic realization of this idea were considered to consist the elements that should be highlighted as integrated and yet separate stages of this procedure (Chapman, 1993, p. 42, 54, Epstein & Trimis, 2005, p. 178, 179). The setting of the stages mentioned above was considered a useful convention for the didactic conditions, mainly for two reasons: firstly, in this way, an initial starting-point is set up, in order to organize our educational intervention in relation to it, and furthermore a tool is offered so as to find out what the children acquired in every stage, according to their initial abilities.

The starting point of our intervention concerned the first stage (that was the conception of an idea). The aim was to make the children realize that artistic work begins a long time before they actually touch their tools and their materials, as an idea that develops, perfects itself and gradually gets materialized, and, thus, it is not created magically, nor is it created incidentally. Above all we wanted to show that there is no such thing as a special kind of "artistic" idea, that anything can be the source of inspiration and the "spark"



for creation. We urged the children to create little simple figures of clay and, then, to add to them natural materials that they collected by themselves from the School of Arts' garden, in order to create simple compositions. Thus, we wanted the children to direct their attentiveness towards every object, every material, and realize that it can be used artistically.

Then, every artist undertook to create a three-dimensional visual composition using several materials, having little groups of children (consisting of 5 or 6 of them) as his assistants. Simple subjects, such as a tree, were chosen. What we wanted the children to realize was that the subject doesn't matter as much as our attitude about it, our personal viewpoint, and the way it's being presented visually. In this frame, even a very simple and ordinary subject, such as a tree, can be approached in many ways and with the use of several materials. What we wanted to show to the children is that anything can be used and employed when it comes to the expressive effort. Consequently, as there is no such thing as a special kind of "artistic" ideas, so there is also no such thing as a special kind of "artistic" materials. What does exist, though, is a creative attitude towards every object, every material.

We urged the children to stand carefully in front of everything in the School of Arts, to observe the materials, the tools, the traces left by their actions, in order to show them that anything, even a random spilling of paint, can be used creatively. Our primary observation was their impressively increasing participation and the request from their side for a more equal participation in order to work on the ideas that they had decided on their own. This desire of theirs created a "bridge" to the next stage.

C. In the next stage of the project, more specifically in the third stage, there was a switch of roles: now the children were the ones that had to decide what they wanted to create and the way to create it. The artists had the role of the assistant, intervening to the minimum and indirectly, only in cases when the children asked them to do so, as the equivalent, just more experienced and older, members of the team. In this new frame the subjects as well as the expressive means were chosen by the children and the artists together and the final work was a collective result, to which everyone had his own particular contribution. The cohesive element of every team was the collective expressive attempt that was perceived by the children as an ability that they had in order to reveal their ideas in a visual way and present them to others.

The artists tried constantly to enforce with their participation an ambience of original artistic attitude. During this attempt they used several techniques, from the area they were more familiar with -which means from the artistic area and not pedagogic techniques. For an instance, they employed practices related with the movement of Surrealism or Dadaism. A random word that someone mentioned at the beginning of the process or many (words), seemingly unrelated, were able to supply the children with a series of conscious associations and thus be a source of inspiration. A random event or something that would otherwise be considered a mistake, such as a spilling or a distortion of the color, could be equally utilized, as a "spark" in order to activate a creative process.

In this particular instance offers the children a chance to understand intimately the ways through which, artistic forms are created and the reasons why they are produced. Each work was the result of a constant quest; each process seemed to reveal itself gradually. The fact that there was a discussion, investigation and elaboration of the initial idea, did not necessarily mean an accurate determination of the final form. Every new proposition didn't negate or undermine the previous ones, but opened up one more prospect, while an idea could be sufficiently vague even during the stage of execution and constantly undergo modifications.

The relation of the expressive means with the expressive intention and vice versa, the transformation of an idea based on the quality of the materials was considered as a principal artistic ability that had to be realized: the expressive attempt leads to the choice of a certain material, but experimenting with materials is a source of inspiration. What the children used were not parts of a certain special kind or category. Anything could be employed considering the expressive attempt. Even the transformative process, in some cases, was absent, as readymade objects were used as well. Anything could be seen from an artistic aspect and be incorporated in a composition or be brought out itself, in an artistic frame, as a visual art object. Our aim was for the children to understand that several techniques aren't strict methods, but human inventions utilized by expressive intention and, thus, are receptive even of the most radical transformations (Ardouin, 2000, p. 179, Parsons, 2002, p. 27).

D. In the fourth stage of the project the children worked individually, with the presence of the artists being as discreet as possible. In this frame every kind of attitude connected to their research was considered



their right (even the seemingly “pointless” game with their materials or the absence of participation). The experience they had acquired was reflected in the variety of their personal expressions and their inquiring attitude towards the expressive means. They discovered unconventional ways to use their tools and their materials, incorporating various objects in their compositions, they took their time to elaborate their ideas, as well as to create several variations on the same idea, to deal with problems with flexibility, finding alternative solutions and persevering in order to perfect their creations.

Through a constant interplay between “convergent” and “divergent”, thinking according to Guilford, the initial didactic convention that was posed, having to do with the stages of the artistic process, seemed to fade. At this case those stages, starting from the conception of an idea and ending to its realization, were mixed together, in a limitless “unfolding” of the artistic act. What is extremely interesting is the fact that the children sought the experience of collectivity again and developed with their own initiative collaborations in order to create common compositions. These collaborations also reflected on the final exposition during which separate works coming from the various teams were united creating unified artistic ensembles.

The issue concerning the final artistic outcome seen from an artistic aspect was not the main issue during any of the stages of the project. Our principal objective was the authenticity of the artistic experience. The fact that the final works actually had an artistic interest was due to the fact that they were the result of an artistic process. The final exposition was considered necessary for two reasons: on the one hand as a way to reach to the audience, in order for the children to experience this aspect of the artistic action, on the other hand, as a visible reminiscence of what had been done, as a representation of the entire process with a priceless meaning. Essentially it offered the ability for a final discussion during which goals, means and results were commented and accounted. Thus this was incorporated actively in the entire project as an essential part of it, becoming a reference, as well as a “spark” to keep on the effort.

Conclusions

This project offered a rich corpus of products, which, related to the tool of schematizing the artistic act in several stages that we mentioned above, allows us to draw various conclusions safely. In this corpus of products we can see the reflection of the impressively increasing ability of the children to find ideas from various sources, to elaborate these ideas mentally, to materialize them and to create several variations on these ideas, as it was visible through the variety of ways that they followed and their personal expressions.

This does not necessarily mean that we searched a tool to measure creativity, innovation or divergent thinking. What we considered as most important was not what the children created, but the impact on them made by the artistic inquiry that accompanied the entire project. And that is not a measurable element. For the educator of art there is no point in having a way of measuring creativity, an effort of evaluating and rating the innovation or the flexibility of thinking that could be separate from the personal process of each child. What is most important is something beyond codification, as it is found in the quality of the experience that was shared –both by the adult artists and by the children– in this collective frame. What we acquired from this experience of ours is crystallized in two principal conclusions:

Our first discovery is that artistic acts are actually creative when the children share the same starting point as the artists, and that starting point is the expressive effort. More specifically: when they sense that, through an action that they are asked to perform, they are given the ability to determine their viewpoint on something and present it to others. For our intervention this means that it operates simultaneously on two levels: on the level of the educational state and on the level of genuine artistic state.

Our second discovery is that creativity (even when it comes to art) does not have a supernatural or mysterious origin, but is a human ability that can be developed with the help of a suitable pedagogic attitude and can be materialized, enforced and expanded in a frame of human communication and interaction.

During this pilot project of the School of Arts of the Municipality of Rion, whose certain points were described roughly, the educational intervention was developed as the result of two factors: on the one hand, through the revealing character of the artists’ action, and on the other hand, through the participation of the children themselves in the artistic process. This is certainly an extreme case, but that does not mean that we described a case that was completely incompatible with the frame that exists in



schools. This is just another didactic convention, an effort to understand the artistic act intimately, a way to be introduced to the world of art that is based on the authenticity of the expressive artistic attempt.

Furthermore school as a place of general "cultivation" is actually a different frame, in which the artistic act might be more structured, more predefined. Even here the creative expressive attempt ought to be present; otherwise the teaching operation hides what should be revealed in the first place. The participation of the children in original artistic procedures is the means through which they can form the notional tools in order to be able to meet art on their own.

What the educator ought to do in the first place is to create these conditions that allow the presence of the artistic act. He must create conditions of collaboration with the children, conditions inquiring, when it comes to the effort of approaching the issues that may arise, and capable of coordinating with the artistic procedure in order to reveal its depth. Thus, the educator has to cope with concepts, practices and issues coming from the artistic area. An additional challenge is the fact that the educator himself must participate in the artistic processes alongside with the children. In any case, it is of major importance that he should on the first place have researched and considered the nature of the artistic act and then be driven to the inquiry of a compatible way of teaching and not the other way around. By that we mean that he should not adapt his intervention according to some predefined educational standards. This issue is certainly a primary duty of the Departments of Educational Sciences, particularly of the ones that have to do with Early Childhood Education.

The content of the artistic education must be considered to have many flowing choices, to allow many different prospects, many ways. The artistic acts are not strict methods in predefined expressive frames that predefine an obligatory way. Having the expressive intention as a start point they have the right to follow different ways, often subversive, without limitations or following certain rules, exactly in order to show that when it comes to art there is no rule that cannot be broken. An educational intervention is thus defined based on the multitude of points of view, an educational intervention that can cope with relativity, subjectivity, vagueness, even contradiction (Eisner, 1972, p. 45); an intervention based on constant conflict with whatever is considered a standard, and in which every dogmatic approach is soon proven to be unfounded; an intervention whose limits are boundless, in the same way that the limits of the artistic art are boundless, as well as the limits of knowledge, thought, imagination and creativity.

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